

Marlonn Hicks report

My name is Lorenzo Vidino and I am an academic who specializes in Islamism in Europe and North America. Over the past 18 years, my research has focused on the mobilization dynamics of jihadist networks in the West, governmental counter-radicalization policies, and the activities of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organizations in the West.

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I am the author of several books and numerous articles. I testified multiple times before the U.S. Congress and other parliaments, advised law enforcement officials around the world, and taught at universities in the U.S. and Europe. I regularly provide commentary to diverse media outlets. I frequently testify in U.S. courts as an expert witness in terrorism cases. Most recently, I testified in the Eastern District of New York and the Northern District of Ohio.

Upon request of the U.S. Attorney's office for the Northern District of Indiana, I have reviewed various documents related to Mr. Marlonn Hicks' case and have written this report.

A brief history of ISIS

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)'s roots can be traced back to a Sunni Islamist group founded in 1999 by a Jordanian national Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹ Initially, the group was named Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad, and its main aim was to overthrow the Jordanian government. After 2001, the core of the group relocated to Iraq and after the 2003 U.S. military intervention in Iraq, it became prominently involved in the insurgency. In 2004 the group became part of the broader al Qaeda (AQ) network and began to be referred to as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

In 2005, Zarqawi joined a coalition of five other Sunni Islamist groups, forming the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC). Shortly after Zarqawi's death in June 2006, the MSC announced the formation of a new group, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which was to rule over the Sunni majority areas of Iraq. The group suffered various setbacks in Iraq, and two of its leaders were killed before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took its helm in 2010.²

Around 2012, the group found a new life in neighboring Syria, as a bloody civil war engulfed the country. In 2013 the group announced its new name, which in Arabic is *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*. "*Al Dawla*" means "state." "*Al Islamiya*" means "Islamic." "*Fi*" means "in." "*Al Iraq*" is "Iraq." "*Wa*" means "and." "*Al Sham*" is the region of greater Syria, often referred to as the Levant or, keeping the original name in Arabic, *Sham*. Therefore, the English acronym of the group's name can be both ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or Islamic State in Iraq and Sham) or ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). Arabic speaking countries, and increasingly, policymakers and politicians in the West, referred to the group using its Arabic acronym DA'ESH/DA'ISH. ISIS supporters do not like these acronyms and tend to use Dawla (State) or Dawla Islamiya (Islamic State).

In June 2014, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the creation of a Caliphate in the lands conquered by ISIS.³ Consequently, the group shortened its name simply to the "Islamic State" (IS), indicating that its aims are global, and not limited to the region of Iraq and Sham. The group also established "provinces" (wilayat), entities in various parts of the world (Sinai, Afghanistan...) that belonged to the group's global structure.

It is clear from numerous posts and conversations that Mr. Hicks was an ardent supporter of the organization. For example, one of his cover photos on Facebook is an image of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi giving the famous speech at the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, Iraq where he declared the Caliphate in June 2014. Hicks also frequently posted ISIS media products and referenced the group's activities in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere on social media. Examples include:

¹ For an extensive history of ISIS, see Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (NY, Oxford University Press, 2015); and Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (NY, Doubleday, 2015).

² Shahid, Anthony. "Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders." At War. May 16, 2010. Accessed July 28, 2016. http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

³ Traditionally, the Caliphate is a state under the leadership of a ruler that encompasses both political and religious authority.

- December 2, 2015: picture quoting an October 2015 video released by IS' information office in Mosul, which read "The soldiers of Islam are fighting here in Iraq, Syria, Khorasan [Afghanistan], the Caucasus, and in West Africa, but their eyes are pointed towards Beit al-Maqdis [Jerusalem] and they will enter it."
- December 2, 2015: post referencing the fall of Ramadi, Iraq to ISIS in 2015: "The Iraqi Army numbering 6000 just lost the battle of Ramadi to just 150 Islamic State soldiers."
- December 3, 2015: post: "According to Google, after Paris Attack Islamic State gains more support from Muslim World."
- March 8, 2016: Image of a militant holding an ISIS flag, standing on top of decapitated Statue of Liberty with the caption "We are coming soon."

Tellingly, Hicks refers to ISIS in manners that demonstrate his desire for recognition as a supporter and affiliate of the group. When he articulates his eagerness to conduct an attack "and [let] them know that the state is responsible," Mr. Hicks' reference to "the state" clearly indicates allegiance to ISIS. Only a committed ISIS supporter would refer to the organization as "the state," as doing so shows belief that ISIS created a full-fledged and legitimate state in Iraq and Syria, something that the vast majority of Muslims worldwide reject. Similarly, when talking about carrying out an attack, Mr. Hicks wanted to make sure people would know it was carried out on behalf of ISIS by stating: "No not recognition of me recognition that this is a state [Islamic State] order like leaving a note or a flag you see akhi [brother]." Expressing a desire to join "Khalifah land [land of the Caliph, the title Baghdadi gave himself]" similarly implies a belief in the theological legitimacy of the self-declared ISIS Caliphate---again, something the vast majority of Muslims worldwide wholeheartedly reject.

While Mr. Hicks might not be well versed in Arabic or in Islamic theology (something very common among ISIS supporters in the United States), the language and symbols used by Hicks in the documents I reviewed clearly show a good knowledge of what ISIS is and wants and, furthermore, a deep commitment to it. Not all ISIS militants are erudite scholars or well-versed in Islamic theology---something Mr. Hicks clearly is not. To the contrary, most have only a passing knowledge of Islam or geopolitics. However, that does not make them less committed to the organization, nor does it make them any less dangerous.

ISIS' shifting message and how Mr. Hicks followed it

Mr. Hicks' knowledge of and commitment to ISIS is demonstrated also by the evolution of his operational wishes, from first seeking to travel to Syria to then planning an attack in America, which closely followed the instructions the group sent to its followers worldwide.

In the first years of its existence in Syria, ISIS focused its messaging on attracting volunteers from all over the world to travel and join the group in Syria. It did so through effective and widespread online propaganda and a facilitating apparatus operating in various countries. ISIS sought to motivate prospective volunteers by simultaneously a) appealing to their (perceived) religious duty to defend fellow Muslims under attack from the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria b) depicting the self-proclaimed Caliphate as a perfect, utopian Islamic society ideal to live a full-fledged Islamic life, and c) triggering the more thrill-seeking volunteers with imagery of violence, camaraderie, and adventure. These messages, carefully packaged in sophisticated video products available across several platforms and in many languages, appealed to thousands of young men and women worldwide. The result was a major influx of fighters from all over the world (some reliable estimates put the number of foreign fighters at around 30,000, some 5,000 of which from Western countries.)⁴

It is apparent from the material I reviewed that Mr. Hicks fully bought into this message, repeatedly expressing a strong desire to travel to Syria to join ISIS and live in the self-proclaimed caliphate. His expressions of interest and support for the Caliphate project are very similar to those of many American ISIS sympathizers who have been arrested or have successfully managed to join the group in Syria over the last few years. For instance, at the time of Mr. Hicks' arrest in October 2016, 45% of all individuals charged in the United States with ISIS-related activity made an attempt to travel to join the group overseas.⁵ Examples of Mr. Hicks' interest in travel include the following Facebook messenger conversations with an undercover agent:

- “Man Ahki [brother] why is all the real people locked up or at least a lot of them everybody just living like it ain't almost over this duniya [worldly life] is killing me wallahi [I swear] i'm gonna get me a passport I gotta get outta here or at least try”
- “Ahki [brother] I be looking online and I be looking at plane tickets so Ahki I have the bread [money] to book a flight they gonna automatically lock me up at airport?? U think?”.... “For trying to go to say Mosul or syria... to join a group lol they need evidence of that right or is they just stopping and interrogating everyone that tries to go.”
- “... I was looking like man it cost about 1500 to go to Mosul i'm like what can they do except tell me to go back home.”
- “Ahki [brother] you sure I don't think my insides will let me do that wallahi [I swear] you might need all that for gear and crib and wife you can have a raw arsenal if you come with bread Ahki... I gotta have something at least a rack [rack equates to a thousand dollars] or 2.”

⁴ http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

⁵ <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/Oct.%202016%20Snapshot.pdf>

- Trying to get a passport “Alhumdulillah [thank God] so i dont need much I contacted my birth city records office I know how to get what I need for I.d. just gotta get a lil dough when you think you ready ahki”

In these conversations Mr. Hicks touches upon many of the issues frequently discussed by American and Western ISIS sympathizers seeking to join the group in Syria: from his burning desire to leave an immoral/corrupt/non-Islamic society (the United States) for life in the Caliphate, to more practical matters such as obtaining a passport, raising the necessary funds for travel, avoiding detection from law enforcement, and maintaining a reserve of additional funds in order to buy weapons for fighting after arriving in ISIS-held territory.

Mr. Hicks clearly adopts the concept of “hijra” (migration) utilized by ISIS. The group argued that it was a legally-binding obligation for able-bodied Muslims to join the group in Syria to help in the creation and the consolidation of what it billed as a Caliphate, the perfect Islamic society. Mr. Hicks repeatedly made comments endorsing that view. It is evident that, in the first phase of his pro-ISIS militancy, his chosen method to support the group was traveling to Syria to fight alongside it.

But, over time, as the rhetoric of ISIS began to shift, so too did Mr. Hicks’ professed intentions. In substance, by 2014 ISIS began to progressively change its message to its supporters and sympathizers worldwide and, particularly, in the West. The group began to exhort followers to carry out attacks in their home countries instead of attempting to travel, arguing that worldwide attacks were more useful to the group’s cause. Mr. Hicks’ change in attitude must be seen in this perspective. Coming from a committed ISIS sympathizer who consumed large doses of the group’s propaganda, the change from a desire to travel to “Khalifah land” to that of “clean[ing] a couple of kuffar [infidels]” in America needs to be seen as following the directives coming from ISIS leadership.

Even though Mr. Hicks had no direct connection to the group’s leadership (similar to the vast majority of Americans who sympathize with ISIS and/or are involved in ISIS-related activities), he perceived himself as part of the group and followed what its leadership told its followers through public messages. The group considers any of its supporters, regardless of whether they physically joined the group in Syria and Iraq or stayed at home and planned attacks, to be members of the group, or as they term them, “soldiers of the Caliphate.” Informality is one of ISIS’ main characteristics, one that allows a self-radicalized young man from Indiana to consider himself as an ISIS member and have reason to believe that if he successfully carried out any plot, the central organization would do the same.

ISIS’ rhetorical shift began to take place in September 2014, as then-US President Barack Obama announced the formation of a global Coalition against the Islamic State, with Western powers providing supplies and air support to regional allies fighting the group.⁶ The intervention by the

⁶ Drennan, Justine. 2014. “Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?” Foreign Policy, November. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/>.

Coalition led to an acceleration of a dynamic that, according to many, was inevitable: the Islamic State setting its sights on the West.

An adversarial perception of the West was in the group's DNA from its inception, a byproduct of its jihadist ideology and its history as an insurgency in Iraq against American forces. There are multiple examples of declared hostility by Islamic State leaders, members, and sympathizers predating the attack by the international coalition. Tellingly, even during the early heydays of the Syria-bound mobilization, Western foreign fighters were flooding the internet with messages promising attacks against the West.⁷

While it is impossible to discern how the Islamic State would have acted had it not been attacked, there are indications that the group was actively planning to conduct terrorist attacks against the West before September 2014. Indeed, one of the main reasons why Western governments decided to shed the timidity that had characterized their responses during the first years of the Syrian conflict and intervene was growing evidence that the Islamic State and other jihadist groups were indeed using Syria as a staging ground for terrorist operations in Europe and North America.

Yet, after conquering territory in both Syria and Iraq, ISIS made what seemed like a conscious decision not to attract excessive attention from the West. Its strategic focus appeared to be concentrating heavily on strengthening and expanding its presence in the Levant, and neighboring areas. In doing so, it benefitted from the indecision of Western powers, which for a variety of complex and overlapping reasons had decided not to intervene in either Syria or Iraq. The vacuum created by the absence of international powers was one of the key enabling factors of ISIS' rise and the group, while still maintaining harsh rhetoric against the West, was judged by Western observers to be striving to contain its innate impulse to carry out acts of violence against the West.

The initiation of airstrikes by the Coalition, which included the United States, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom among others arguably changed this dynamic. The Islamic State's propaganda quickly switched gears and began sending vitriolic and very direct threats against the West. This new posture was perfectly encapsulated in a speech given in September 2014, a week after the declaration of the Coalition's intervention, and then widely circulated by the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus, by Taha Sobhi Fahla, better known as Abu Mohammed al Adnani, the group's official spokesperson.⁸ The speech, entitled *Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful*, follows a two-tiered approach through which the Syrian-born militant sent a strong message to two different audiences: Westerners and Muslims.

To the former, Adnani issued direct threats to their security:

.....O Americans, and O Europeans, the Islamic State did not initiate a war against you, as your governments and media try to make you believe. It is you who started the transgression against us, and thus you deserve blame and you will pay a great price. You will pay the price when your economies collapse. You will pay the price when your sons are sent to wage war against us and they return to you as disabled amputees, or inside coffins, or mentally ill. You will pay the price as you are afraid of travelling to any land. Rather you will pay the price as you walk on your streets, turning right and left, fearing the Muslims.....

⁷ Hegghammer, Thomas, and Petter Nesser. 2015. "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (4). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440..>

⁸ *Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful*, speech by Shaykh Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani Ash-shami, Al Hayat Media,

.....We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted. This is His promise to us; He is glorified and He does not fail in His promise. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market.....

For Muslims worldwide and the West in particular, Adnani sought to incite them. At times, Adnani tried to trigger their sense of pride and support the Islamic State by attacking the West:

....So rise O muwahhid. Rise and defend your state from your place wherever you may be....

.....So O muwahhid, wherever you may be, what are you going to do to support your brothers? What do you wait for as the people have become two encampments and the heat of the war increases day by day? O muwahhid, we call you up to defend the Islamic State....

.....Will you leave the disbeliever to sleep safely at home while the Muslim women and children shiver with fear of the roars of the crusader airplanes above their heads day and night? How can you enjoy life and sleep while not aiding your brothers, not casting fear into the hearts of the cross worshippers, and not responding to their strikes with multitudes more? So O muwahhid wherever you may be, hinder those who want to harm your brothers and state as much as you can. The best thing you can do is to strive to your best and kill any disbeliever, whether he be French, American, or from any of their allies...

Adnani continued his speech suggesting various tactics to those who accepted his exhortation. Western countries have become tragically acquainted with some of them:

.....So O muwahhid, do not let this battle pass you by wherever you may be. You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawāghīt. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Destroy their beds. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling. Both of them are disbelievers....

....Rig the roads with explosives for them [the disbelievers]. Attack their bases. Raid their homes. Cut off their heads. Do not let them feel secure. Hunt them wherever they may be. Turn their worldly life into fear and fire. Remove their families from their homes and thereafter blowup their homes....

.....If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him...

....If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops. If you are unable to do so, then spit in his face....

Adnani repeated his incitement on several occasions before being killed in Aleppo province by a US airstrike in August 2016.⁹ For example, in March 2015, shortly after the attacks in Paris that targeted the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and the Hypercacher kosher superette, Adnani again announced: “know that we want Paris – by Allah’s permission – before Rome and before Spain, after we blacken your lives and destroy the White House, the Big Ben, and the Eiffel Tower.”¹⁰

Similar messages appeared regularly in ISIS’ official magazines *Dabiq*, *Rumiyyah*, and other ISIS official publications, and throughout its propaganda. The group issued direct threats against specific Western countries (the United States and France are most frequently cited, but the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia are also mentioned often). Eulogies of “soldiers of the Caliphate”--- Islamic State supporters who carried out attacks in the West--- and detailed descriptions of their gestures became a way for the group to simultaneously threaten the West and encourage others to heed its call. Examples of this dynamic include, among many,

- *Dabiq*, Issue 9, praising the perpetrators of the May 2015 Garland attack: “their determination to support the cause of Allah and punish those who insult the Prophet *sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* [peace be upon Him] should serve as inspiration to those residing in the lands of the crusaders who are still hesitant to perform their duty. Those men who have read the countless *āyāt* [Q’uranic verses] and *ahādīth* [sayings and teachings of the prophet Muhammad] on the virtues of *jihād* and have made sincere *du ‘ā’* [prayer] to Allah asking Him for *shahādah* [martyrdom] but have yet to act, should consider that Allah will not grant them their *du ‘ā’* [prayer] until they take a step towards this noble duty.”¹¹
- *Dabiq*, Issue 12, praising the November 2015 attacks in France: “For until then, the just terror will continue to strike them to the core of their deadened hearts”¹²
- *Dabiq*, Issue 13, praising the December 2015 San Bernadino attacks: “Thus, the *Khilāfah*’s [Caliphate’s] call for the Muslims to strike the crusaders in their own lands was answered once more...”¹³, and “Let the crusaders get used to the sound of explosion and the image of carnage in their very own homelands”¹⁴
- *Dabiq*, Issue 13, also praising the November 2015 Paris attacks: “Let Paris be a lesson for those nations that wish to take heed”¹⁵

⁹ BBC News. 2016. “Islamic State: Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani ‘Killed in Aleppo,’” August 31, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37224570>.

¹⁰ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “They kill and they are killed”, 12 March 2015

¹¹ “They Plot and Allah Plots.” 2015. *Dābiq* 9 (May). <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/21/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-9/>, p. 3

¹² “Just Terror.” 2015. *Dābiq* 12 (November). <http://jihadology.net/2015/11/18/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-12%E2%80%B3/>. 3

¹³ “The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjāl.” 2016. *Dābiq* 12 (January). <http://jihadology.net/2016/01/19/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-13/>, p. 3

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55

- *Rumiyyah*, Issue 2: “Those Muslims residing in the West, in particular, have an opportunity to terrorize the Crusaders themselves as well as the *imams* of *kufr* [non-belief] allied to the Crusaders.”¹⁶

Mr. Hicks displayed an understanding of this dynamic on several occasions. At least twice, he expressed his frustration at the fact that he could no longer go to Syria (because Syria-bound travel had become difficult), and stated that carrying out attacks in America would be the obvious next step:

“No akhi they have closed the door in our face so you eventually plan to get busy yes??? I make Dua [prayer] for it akhi”

“I’m hurt that I can’t go and join by brothers [e.g., by traveling to Syria/Iraq] so since they shut the door now I’m gonna open the door to hell for them In Shaa Allah [God willing]...”

In addition to the increased difficulty of traveling to Syria or Iraq, high-profile, successful attacks carried out by supporters of ISIS in the West appear to have motivated Mr. Hicks as well. As he repeatedly explained, Mr. Hicks was inspired by various terrorist attacks perpetrated in the United States (Orlando) or in Europe (Paris, Brussels) by individuals connected to or inspired by ISIS. Statements displaying these intentions include:

“These recent events that has happened got me thinking about ops out here”

“It only been maybe a Lil over a year but I been ready for maybe 6 months but like I say after recent events I will most likely die here In Shaa Allah [God willing]”

“I’m down but I’m not trying to clean only a couple kuffar [non believers] I wanna do something major major without being caught...it is the call these brothers [those who carried out attacks] broke the ice for us lol”

As previously stated, Mr. Hicks’ lack of direct connections to ISIS did not negatively impact his intention of carrying out the attack on behalf of the organization. Had he carried out the attack, ISIS would have likely claimed the attack as its own, claiming it was carried out by a “soldier of the Caliphate.” Both dynamics are the norm when it comes to ISIS-related attacks in the West. Various studies (see, for example, the 2017 study *Fear Thy Neighbor*, which analyzed all jihadist attacks in the West from the June 2014 declaration of the Caliphate until May 2017) have clearly demonstrated that the majority of terrorist attacks in Europe and, in even greater percentage, the United States, have been perpetrated by individuals who possessed little or no operational connection to ISIS but were simply inspired by the group’s ideology.¹⁷

¹⁶ “A Message from East Africa.” 2016. *Rumiyyah* 2 (October). <http://jihadology.net/2016/10/04/new-release-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-rome-2/>. 3

¹⁷<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/FearThyNeighbor%20RadicalizationandJihadistAttacksintheWest.pdf>

A few of these individuals conducted attacks without any known support or formal links to the Islamic State. Alternatively, some individuals may have coalesced, either online or offline, with members of the group. Without official ties to the organization, some individuals may cast themselves as contributors to the broader movement. That is exactly Mr. Hicks' situation. His lack of direct connectivity is, the standard modus operandi of ISIS in the West. Mr. Hicks appears to be well aware of this norm when he discussed the modalities of the attack he wished to carry out.

It is also standard for ISIS-affiliated lone actor terrorists to attempt to link their attack to the organization, to make sure that ISIS gets credit for the attack and that their actions are publicly seen as linked to the organization. Also, from this point of view, it is clear that Mr. Hicks has fully absorbed ISIS' directives and modus operandi:

“No not recognition of me recognition that this is a state [Islamic State] order like leaving a note or a flag you see akhi [brother]?”

“Wallahi [I swear to God] it don't take much the only thingg is letting them know that the state [e.g., the Islamic State] is responsible you know it is easy to plug [kill] someone from half a football field but getting our tag on the scene [clearly indicating that the attack was committed by supporters of the Islamic State] without being seen”

Americans in ISIS

To the layperson, it might seem odd that ISIS might be able to recruit to its cause young men and women from the heart of America, ordinary individuals who have never been to the Middle East or had strong connections in militant milieus. Yet, the reality of the last few years has shown this to be the norm.

ISIS's formation of a self-proclaimed caliphate, in fact, has exercised a magnetic draw for many young Western Muslims. The scale of this mobilization is unprecedented. Even though precise data is virtually impossible to obtain, it is believed that some 5,000 European citizens or residents have become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, a number that dwarfs all previous mobilizations (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and Mali) combined.¹⁸

The numbers in the U.S., while difficult to gauge with precision, are significantly lower than those in most European countries. In June 2015 the FBI stated that “upwards of 200 Americans have traveled or attempted to go to Syria to participate in the conflict.”¹⁹ A few weeks later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the U.S. had

¹⁸ Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), January 26, 2015.

¹⁹ Testimony of Michael B. Steinbach, Assistant Director of the FBI, *Terrorism Gone Viral: The Attack in Garland, Texas and Beyond*, House Homeland Security Committee, June 3, 2015.

traveled or attempted to travel to the conflict area, a few dozens had joined the ranks of ISIS, and some 20 had died.²⁰

Moreover, the surge in the number of American foreign fighters is small compared to those who sympathize with and embrace ISIS's ideology. American authorities have consistently said that the popularity of ISIS's propaganda, driven largely by its savvy social media tactics, wholly overshadows that of al Qaeda. Tellingly, in May 2015 FBI Director James Comey spoke of "hundreds, maybe thousands" of ISIS sympathizers and potential recruits across the country, disclosing that the Bureau had related investigations running in all 50 states.²¹ A few months later, in October 2015, Comey revealed that the FBI had a staggering 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists.²²

Publicly available information confirms a sharp surge of jihadist activities in the U.S., especially when compared to dynamics seen in the years since the wave of arrests following 9/11. One hundred individuals have been charged in the U.S. in connection with ISIS-related offenses since arrests were first made in March 2014. Of these, 46 have pleaded or were found guilty.

The profiles of American ISIS sympathizers—from those who merely tout the group's ideology online to those intimately involved in ISIS recruitment, financing, or fighting—are incredibly diverse. Ranging from grown men who had flirted with jihadist militancy for over a decade to teenagers who have only recently converted to Islam, from the son of a Boston area police officer to a single mother of two young children, these individuals differ widely in race, age, social class, education, and family background.

Individuals with such diverse backgrounds are unlikely to be motivated by the same factors. Policymakers and academics around the world have formulated a number of explanatory theories about the underlying factors driving people to radicalize. Some focus on structural elements such as political tensions and cultural cleavages, the so-called "root causes" of radicalization. Others stress personal factors such as the shock of a life-changing event. Matt Venhaus captures the diversity of the individuals attracted to jihadist ideology, categorizing them as revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers, and thrill seekers.²³ But it is clear that these categories are not exhaustive and that, in many cases, an individual exhibits the characteristics of more than one category. In substance, most experts agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors.

In many cases, an underlying sense of sympathy and compassion appeared to play an essential role in initially motivating young Americans to become interested and invested in the Syrian conflict. Many were outraged by the appalling violence Bashar al Assad's regime used to suppress the Syrian rebellion and the subsequent inaction on the part of the international community. Pictures and videos capturing the aftermath of civilian massacres perpetrated by the regime, displayed widely in both social and mainstream media, rocked the consciences of many—from those with

²⁰ Barbara Starr, "A Few Dozen Americans' in ISIS Ranks," *CNN*, July 15, 2015.

²¹ Tom Vanden Brook, "ISIL Activity Drives up Pentagon Threat Level," *USA Today*, May 8, 2015.

²² Kevin Johnson, "Comey: Feds have Roughly 900 Domestic Probes about Islamic State Operatives," *USA Today*, October 23, 2015.

²³ Colonel John M. "Matt" Venhaus, U.S. Army, "Why Youth Join al-Qaeda," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2010.

an existing strong Sunni identity to those who were not Muslim—and led some to take the first steps to militancy.

A significant shift began as the anti-regime rebellion in Syria came to be increasingly dominated by militant groups. By the time ISIS formally declared its caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of recruits appeared to revolve more around fulfilling perceived religious obligations, such as performing *hijrah* (migration from a non-Muslim society to a Muslim one, as per the prophet Mohammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina) and the opportunity to participate in the creation of a utopian Islamic society.

But ideological motivations are deeply intertwined with, and impossible to separate from, personal motives. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) observes that those who embrace ISIS’s ideology tend to be “disenfranchised individuals seeking ideological, religious and personal fulfillment.”²⁴ A search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS’s ideology.

This search for meaning was perfectly encapsulated in the words of Moner Abu Salha, the 22-year-old Floridian who is the first American known to have died in a suicide mission in Syria on behalf of Jabhat al Nusra. “I lived in America,” stated Abu Salha in a 2014 video. “I know how it is. You have all the fancy amusement parks and the restaurants and the food and all this crap and the cars. You think you’re happy. You’re not happy. You’re never happy. I was never happy. I was always sad and depressed. Life sucked.”²⁵ In contrast, he described life fighting in Syria as “the best I’ve ever lived.”²⁶

It is difficult to fully comprehend the complex mental processes that led Hicks, Abu Salha, and other young Americans, to embark on such an extreme journey. What is apparent is that ISIS and its propaganda machine have been particularly adept at exploiting the emotions, needs, and weaknesses of young Americans, irrespective of their demographic backgrounds.

Indeed, it is online that, in most cases, most radicalization dynamics related to ISIS take place. The same is true in the case of Mr. Hicks. Many of these dynamics that characterize the informal online community of American ISIS sympathizers are apparent also in Mr. Hicks’s case. In fact, he:

- Used avatars and pictures that are extremely common in the pro-ISIS online community
- Posted and exchanged jihadist propaganda
- Sent operational manuals on how to manufacture and use explosives to individuals he believed to be like-minded ISIS sympathizers
- Expressed his desires to join ISIS and then carry out attacks on his behalf

These are all typical actions of the average American ISIS supporter. In this specific case, Mr. Hicks appears to have gone further than merely consuming and sharing the group’s propaganda.

²⁴ Testimony of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, *Countering Violent Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror*, House Homeland Security Committee, February 11, 2015.

²⁵ Mona El-Naggar and Quynhanh Do, “Video Released of U.S. Bomber in Syria,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2014.

²⁶ Ibid.

He repeatedly expressed an interest in carrying out an attack that, in his words, replicated the model advocated by ISIS and employed by ISIS supporters in Europe and North America.

ISIS and Mr. Hicks' homophobia

In statements made in recorded phone calls during his detention, Mr. Hicks expressed very strong homophobic positions and categorically affirmed that gay people should be executed.

- “First of all gay people they-they punishment period. When you [UI] you supposed to kill they ass. If you- if you [OV]. Yeah, yeah. When you find a gay person you supposed to kill they ass. Straight up. That-if you-if you wanna go-that-if you wana know what the- what the book says. That’s what the book says.”

Homophobia is, unfortunately, widespread in our society and ISIS hardly has the monopoly over it. In this specific case, though, there are indications that Mr. Hicks’ views could be motivated by his continued adherence to ISIS ideology. ISIS, in fact, has historically engaged in a brutal campaign against homosexuality in both words and deeds.

On December 15, 2014, ISIS released a penal code entitled, “Clarification [regarding] the Hudud [Islamic punishments that entail physical measures].” The document details the punishment for various illegal acts, including gay sex (“death for the person committing the act, as well as for the one receiving it.”). Similar positions were expressed in Dabiq, ISIS’ official English language magazine. Issue 7 of Dabiq stated:

Rather than taking heed upon witnessing the destruction of their social fabric, and changing their “way of life,” the kuffār [non-believers] defiantly persisted on their mission to eradicate their morals. They used their entertainment industry to mock and belittle those against the sexually deviant fringe, used their shirk-based [based on polytheism] parliaments to legalize sodomite marriage, used their education system to corrupt their children right from the kindergarten level by introducing books into the curriculum to combat “homophobia,” and used their churches and clergy to bless these sins via “revisionism.”

Examples of this last tactic included the anointment of sodomite priests, the Catholic Pope’s refusal to “sit in judgment” of sodomite priests saying, “Who am I to judge?” and the publishing of articles that argue against their own traditional understanding of the distorted scriptures, such as claiming that the people of Sodom were destroyed for their cruelty and arrogance, and not for their sodomy. In the midst of this widespread affront to the fitrah natural human disposition), the Islamic State continues its efforts against these deeds of misguidance – which Western “Civilization” regards as a part of their “values” – by implementing the rulings of Allah on those who practice any form of sexual deviancy or transgression.

This was demonstrated recently in Wilāyat ArRaqqah [the ISIS province in Raqqa, Syria], where the Islamic State carried out the hadd [capital punishment] on a man found guilty of engaging in sodomy. He was taken to the top of a building and thrown off, as was one of the traditions of the noble companion Abū Bakr as-Siddīq (radiyallāhu ‘anh) [may God be pleased with him] with those who committed this filthy deed. Also in Wilāyat Ar-Raqqah, a woman was stoned after

being found guilty of zinā [adultery]. In Wilāyat alKhayr, [the ISIS province in Deir es Zor, Syria] meanwhile, a man was recently flogged as a ta'zīr (disciplinary punishment) after he was found to be in possession of pornographic material.

Public executions of homosexuals, carried out as macabre rituals in front of crowds and then broadcasted through well produced videos, were commonplace in ISIS' Caliphate. A June 13, 2016, *Washington Post* article "The Islamic State's shocking war on gays" perfectly describes these dynamics:

In areas under the control of the Islamic State, its fighters have issued edicts against homosexual behavior and flashy hairstyles and promised death for anyone caught in the act of sodomy..... In the months that followed, the militants steadily built up a catalog of atrocities against gay people living under their watch. The group released numerous videos appearing to show the execution of supposed homosexuals. OutRight Action International, which advocates for LGBT rights, has tracked more than two dozen executions of men and women charged with crimes linked to their sexual identity.....In a single day in September, the Islamic State killed nine men and a 15-year-old boy in a Syrian town who had been accused of sodomy. In January 2015, a media wing of the extremist group released images that appeared to show fighters pushing men accused of homosexuality off a building in the Iraqi city of Mosul. In July, two men suffered the same fate in the Syrian city of Palmyra, then controlled by the Islamic State. They were shoved off the roof of a hotel after an Islamic State official ruled that they must die.

Conclusion

After careful review of the evidence provided to me, it is my opinion that Mr. Hicks had a good knowledge of what ISIS is, of its aims and its modus operandi. In particular, his shift from seeking to travel to Syria to planning attacks in the United States appears to take place because Mr. Hicks was aware of the many messages coming from ISIS propaganda instructing the group's followers in that direction. While not particularly sophisticated in his knowledge of theology or geopolitics (a common characteristic among ISIS supporters), Mr. Hicks appears to be fully committed to the group's ideology. His lack of direct connections with ISIS does not mitigate his adherence to the group, as most ISIS supporters in America and Europe, including those who carried out terrorist attacks on behalf of ISIS, had no ties to the organization.